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ABSTRACT

This study used a Vygotskian perspective to compare child rearing values and beliefs of parents, especially in regard to self-directed activities of children, in the United States, Russia, and Estonia. Participating were 60 families, evenly divided by society and social class (middle or working class), each with a child between 28 and 45 months old. Families were located in Greensboro, North Carolina; Obninsk, Russia; and Tartu, Estonia. Interview and questionnaire data were collected from parents, and observational data were obtained from children observed in their everyday activities for 20 hours during 1 week, focusing on academic lessons, skill/nature lesson, play with academic objects, and conversation with adults. Findings indicated that middle-class parents rated self-direction higher, and control and discipline lower, than working-class parents, and were less likely to be concerned with spoiling their children by giving attention than were working-class parents. There were no cultural differences in parent values and beliefs. Children in Obninsk and Tartu were far more likely than those from Greensboro to be involved in skill/nature lesson. Middle-class children were more likely than working-class counterparts to be involved in academic or skill/nature lessons, except in Obninsk, where there were no social class differences in academic lessons. Middle-class children were more likely to initiate the activities of interest than were their working-class counterparts. (Contains 17 references.) (KB)

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Social change, socio-economic status, and the development of self-direction in children: A comparison of Russia, Estonia, and the United States

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Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation for the project (The Cultural Ecology of Young Children) from which these data have been drawn is derived from the cultural-historical theory of Lev Vygotsky (1987; see also van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994) and Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1989, 1993). In essence, these theorists require that we take a systemic approach to human development, an approach that does justice to the inherent interrelation between cultural contexts (as they have developed over historical time) and the individuals who inhabit those contexts. To fully understand development, we argue, it is necessary to consider the necessary connections between aspects of the developing individual (including his or her active ways of making sense of the world, motivations, and goals), the interpersonal relationships the individual has with the various people who inhabit the same contexts (roles, shared

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activities, feelings, etc.), and the different contexts in which the individual's development occurs. As Bronfenbrenner (1989) described it, context can be thought of as constituting an interconnected set, including the immediate contexts in which an individual is situated (in which the individual engages in activities with and without social partners) and the broader contexts (including the cultural groups of which that individual is a part at some specifiable period of historical time). The individual, in this perspective, is highly active in the process of making sense of and learning to fit into (and also to change) his or her world. At the same time, those who are more competent help the individual learn to behave and think in ways considered appropriate by the cultural group. In turn, the various cultural institutions, tools, practices, values and beliefs about the world (things that have developed over historical time) constrain people's conceptions of what is and is not appropriate, while at the same time are being changed as each new generation constructs a somewhat different set of conceptions (Valsiner, 1989).

From this perspective, we believe that it is important to observe the ways individuals in different contexts initiate and engage in activities in their everyday lives, their partners in those activities, and the roles taken by them and their partners. In this way it becomes possible to understand the linkages between culture, context, and activities and see the processes whereby cultural groups tend to be both re-created and changed as new members of the groups develop within them.

Methodology

To illustrate this process, we have been dealing with cultural context in two different, yet related, ways. We have chosen to study children's development from three different societies which, at the present time, may allow interesting contrasts. The United States is believed to be a society that positively values individualism, whereas the former Soviet Union was a society that was held to value a more collectivist orientation (Bronfenbrenner 1970; Triandis, 1995; Tudge, 1991). The roots of collectivism, however, are to be found to a much greater extent in Russian history than in Estonian history, where the links are much closer, both linguistically and culturally, to Finland, a far more

individualistically-oriented society (Kirveennummi, Rasanen, & Virtanen, 1994). Although the parents of the children in our study were raised under the Soviet system, since the break-up of the Soviet Union families have had to deal with the new realities of life. It thus becomes very interesting to study values, beliefs, and practices in these three societies.

However, despite these general orientations to life that are often taken to be markers of entire societies (Triandis, 1995), in any society is to be found heterogeneity as a function of education, social class, racial or ethnic group, region, and so on. Following the ideas of Melvin Kohn (1977, 1979, 1995), we decided to examine heterogeneity as a function of social class, and explore Kohn's contention that members of different social classes value different things for their children. Specifically, we were interested in testing the proposition that middle class parents are more likely to value autonomy and self-direction in their children whereas working class parents see a greater value in their children learning obedience to the rules that others impose. Of course, when dealing with societies as diverse as the United States, Russia, and Estonia, the meaning of social class is likely to differ. In the case of the present study we selected families that could be clearly placed into either of two groups. In one group were families in which parents had a college degree or higher and a professional/intellectual occupation (loosely termed "middle class") and in the other group were families in which neither partner had the equivalent of a college degree and whose job was non-professional (working class).

Methods. In order to examine the processes that could help translate these cultural and sub-cultural aspects into reality we collected interview and questionnaire data from the parents focusing on their child-rearing values and beliefs. We also collected observational data on the children's everyday activities, to see how these values and beliefs may be instantiated in practice. Our general hypothesis was that if there were cultural and sub-cultural variations in values and beliefs these should be reflected in the families' everyday activities. However, rather than take a simple unidirectional position going from culture to parents' values and beliefs to the ways in which parents raise their children, from our systemic and co-constructivist perspective it was important to examine the extent to which the children

themselves played an active role in this process of re-creating and changing their group. We were therefore interested in the ways in which the activities in which the children engaged were initiated by their parents or by the children themselves.

The study was not intended to provide data from a representative sample from the societies and social classes of interest. Instead, we chose from each society a single city as similar as we could achieve. Each city (Greensboro, NC, USA, Obninsk, Russia, and Tartu, Estonia) was of a similar size (100,000 to 300,000 inhabitants), situated a few hours drive from the respective capital cities, with at least one institution of higher education, and with a range of professional and working class occupations. In Greensboro and Tartu families were initially identified from the children's birth records and lived in two different areas of the city. In Obninsk inspection of birth records was not possible, and families were recruited primarily by "snowballing." Families were invited to participate if they met educational and occupational criteria, and acceptance rates were quite good (above 60%).

Material and environmental conditions of life differed in the cities, of course (Tudge et al., in press). In Greensboro, one of the two areas was clearly middle class (houses were large and expensive, with large gardens), whereas the other area was a working class area, with much smaller and cheaper houses on smaller lots. This differentiation reflects the reality of life in the United States, where professional status typically is associated with high income. In neither Obninsk nor Tartu was this the case. Members of the intelligentsia (those with high education and a professional occupation) do not currently earn more than those with much less education and a working class job (a continuation of the situation that existed in the former Soviet Union in general), and members of the two groups live side-by-side.

Participants. The complete sample involved 60 families, evenly divided by society and social class, each of which had a child aged between 28 and 45 months of age. Observational data were collected first, followed by interview and questionnaire data collected from the parents. Unfortunately, we were only able to use observational data collected from 10 of the 20 Obninsk families, although we

were able to use questionnaire data on all of these families. The data presented here, on parental values and beliefs, were derived from the Parental Values Q-Sort developed by Kohn (1977) and from the Parents' Opinion Survey (Hogan & Tudge, 1995, adopted from Luster, 1985). The observational data were collected, on each child, over one week, in such a way that the child was observed for the equivalent of one complete day. A total of 20 hours of observational data were collected on each child, in blocks of two or four hours, by following the child wherever he or she was situated, including the home, child care centre, shopping, with friends, in the park, and with grandparents. The observers (members of the respective cultural groups) did real-time coding of the activities in which the children were engaged, the manner of initiation of the activities, partners in the activities, and the respective roles of child and partner for 18 hours, and videotaped the final two hours. [For more details, please refer to Tudge, et al., in press, available from the first author.]

The activities in which we were interested included lessons, work, play (including exploration and entertainment), and conversation, each of which had between three and 13 sub-categories. For this presentation we focus on four activities in which the children engaged, academic lessons, skill/nature lessons, play with academic objects, and conversation with adults. These activities are those that we felt most likely to be associated with later academic competence, because one of our interests is in teachers' and parents' perceptions of these children's competence once they are in school, although the longitudinal data are not the focus of this presentation (for the US data, refer to Odero, Hogan, & Tudge, 1995). Definitions of these activities are as follows: Academic lessons (explicit attempts to request or receive information on literacy, numeracy, etc.); Skill/Nature lessons (requesting or receiving information related to how to do things [tying shoelaces, operating the VCR], or to the workings of the natural world; Play with academic objects (the object has academic relevance, but no explicit lesson takes place); and Conversation with one or more adults (defined as talk about something that is not part of the on-going activity).

Results

Our first interest was to know whether parents differed in terms of their values and beliefs, whether by society and/or by social class. Our first hypothesis, based on the work of Triandis (1995), was that the parents in Greensboro would evaluate self-direction higher and would be less interested in controlling their children than would parents in the other two cities. Moreover, based on the research of Kohn (1979) and Luster and his colleagues (Luster, Rhoades, & Hass, 1989) we hypothesized that in each city middle class parents would be more likely than their working class counterparts to rate self-direction higher, control and discipline lower, and would be less likely to be concerned with spoiling their children by being attentive to them.

As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, the first hypothesis was not supported. However, the hypothesized social class variations were found.

Fig. 1: Parents' Values about Self-Direction

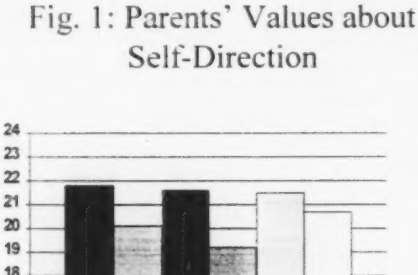
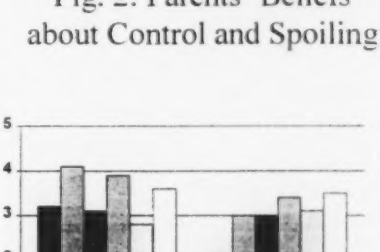


Fig. 2: Parents' Beliefs about Control and Spoiling



Our next questions of interest related to the actual observations of children's activities. Our main hypothesis, given social class differences in values and beliefs, was that middle class parents in each society would encourage their children to engage in the types of activities mostly associated with becoming independently competent--namely, academic and skill/nature lessons, as well as play with academic objects and conversation with adults. The results are presented in Figures 3 and 4, below.

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Fig. 3: Involvement in lessons (by city and social class)

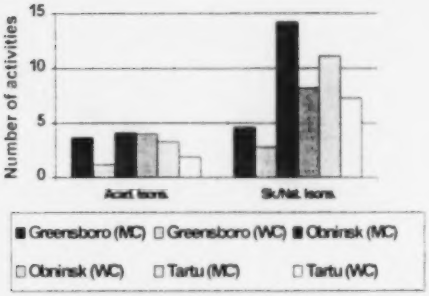
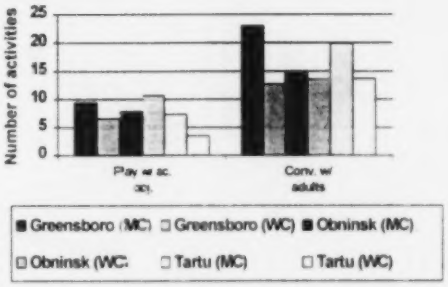


Fig. 4: Involvement in play with academic objects and conversation (by city and social class)



As can be seen in Figure 3, the most striking finding was that children in Obninsk and Tartu were far more likely than those from Greensboro to be involved in skill/nature lessons. It was also the case that middle class children were more likely than their working class counterparts to be involved in lessons, both in academic lessons and skill/nature lessons. The exception was in Obninsk, where no social class differences were found in terms of academic lessons. Similarly, as is seen in Figure 4, social class differences in the expected direction were found in Greensboro and in Tartu, although not in Obninsk.

These data, though interesting, do not necessarily support the theoretical model we have proposed. They would fit equally well a purely unidirectional socialization perspective of development, with the influences flowing from context (culture or social class) to parental values and from there to the types of activities being made available to the children. To support the theoretical model, it is necessary to show that the children are actively involved in this process, helping to recreate the cultural group in which they are situated. It was therefore important for us to examine the ways in which these activities were initiated. Middle class children could be involved in more of the activities simply because those around them (particularly other adults) provided more of them. They could also be involved in more because they initiated the activities, for example by asking questions of an academic nature, starting a conversation with an adult, and so on.

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Fig. 5: Initiation of lessons (by city and social class)

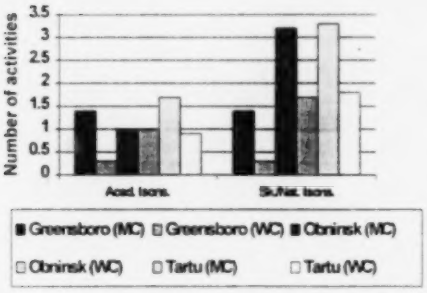
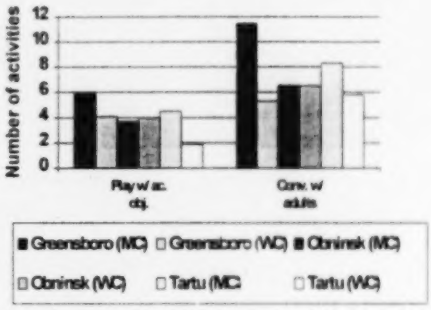


Fig. 6: Initiation of play with academic objects and conversation (by city and social class)



The data presented in Figures 5 and 6 make it clear that middle class children were more likely themselves to initiate the activities of interest than were their working class counterparts. From a systemic perspective, it is clearly not the case that the children themselves are solely responsible for engagement in these activities. Instead, in the course of their experiences in the first three years of their lives, they have come to understand that those around them expect and think it appropriate for them to exercise self-direction differentially as a function of social class.

Conclusion

We were surprised to find no society-wide differences in parents' valuation of self-direction for their children and minimal differences regarding their beliefs about control and spoiling their children. One possible explanation relates to changes that have occurred over the past decade in Eastern Europe, following the break-up of the Soviet Union. As Russian and Estonian parents have observed such changes, away from collectivism and towards an economy based on capitalism and competition, they may have revised their views about the characteristics needed for their children to succeed. Where once the ability to compromise and conform may have been conducive to a successful work-life, now initiative and independence in thought and action may be perceived as being more important. This may help to explain why the children in Obninsk and Tartu were far more likely to engage in skill/nature lessons than children in Greensboro; parents in the Russian and Estonian cities may have believed that

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these types of lessons may help their children to be more independent. (It is also the case, however, that traditionally parents and children in both of these countries are much more likely than those in the United States to spend time outside the home working on small vegetable gardens.)

Culture and society are not synonymous, however, and from the theoretical perspective we have espoused it is important not to ignore within-society heterogeneity as a function (for example) of social class. Our data clearly supported the idea that members of different socio-economic groupings in each of the cities in which we gathered data expressed somewhat different values and beliefs, with middle class (professional or intelligentsia) parents being more likely to positively evaluate self-direction for the their children and with working class parents more likely to believe in the importance of controlling and disciplining their children and being more concerned about spoiling them. Many of these class differences were reflected in variations in the activities in which the children were engaged, although less so in Obninsk than in either Greensboro or Tartu.

These data also make clear that the link between these macrosystem factors (society or social class) and activities is not simply unidirectional, with the direction of effects being from macrosystem to parents' values and beliefs to children's activities. The co-constructive nature of the process is clearly shown by the fact that many of the differences in terms of children's engagement in activities can be explained by the fact that the children themselves differentially initiated the activities. Social class was again key--the children from professional or intelligentsia families were more likely to than those from working class families to exercise self-direction by asking questions about things from the academic or natural world, to inquire about how things worked, and to choose to play with toys of an academic nature.

Cultures change over time, of course. These data were gathered a few years after events of major significance to the entire world. Because we do not have equivalent data from prior to the break-up of the Soviet Union it is impossible to know to what extent parents' values and beliefs or their children's activities have changed. Nonetheless, it is a salutary reminder to attend to what

Bronfenbrenner has called "chronosystem effects" and to remind ourselves of why Vygotsky's theory is termed a "cultural-historical" theory. Even when one cannot trace the effects of events such as these it is important to place our data in its historical, as well as cultural, context.

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